

TOY & SPARK

A Thesis

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by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephanie Gehring was born in Giessen, Germany, in 1980. She lived in Germany (speaking English at home and German everywhere else) until age 16, then moved with her family to Oregon. She graduated from St. Olaf College in Minnesota in 2002 with a double major in studio art and English. She finished her MFA at Cornell in January 2008 and was the recipient of the Corson-Browning Prize in 2007. While here, she spent her time walking all over Ithaca, grading student essays on mystery stories, and forgetting to check her e-mail.

for my parents, Roger and Claudia Gehring

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I

Antiphonies

Fog

drips, thick,
rustles dry in the ivy like many small animals foraging.
Behind a doorway,
piano music starts, a song I know;
then stops one note before the crest
of the arpeggio. Why does it feel
as though someone I love is dying?
Nothing has happened here beyond the strangeness
of another night on earth, sunset swallowed
by this opaque sky, and from somewhere above,
the questioning assurances
of geese—*you there? you there? I'm here—*
you there—

Vellum

they scraped holes in you sometimes that tore
as you stretched: they never threw you away

just wrote around the holes because it costs money

feeding the creature you came from, killing it
soaking its skin in watered lime to rot the hairs off

on one side you are cream or gray, the other chalky

you were heavy and stank, slipped
through the parchmenters' fingers

the part that covered the tender insides

of legs, the thin skin on bellies: this they looped

tight with cords connected to short pegs
set in a frame so they could pull you taut

and use a flat sharp arc of metal
to pare down your layers, past the sheen

of waterproof to where the pores don't show

then you were matte and smooth
as anything so tough the scribes could not

forget you were alive

Smoke

One. You wiped a table
on which I'd spilled a tall glass
of water.

Two. It had never happened before.
The green beans were lurid,
the corn alive.

Three. I misunderstood your eyes.
There were carp. Where did the carp
come from?

Four. You were afraid of talking
to the Franciscan: one touch
and you'd be off, committed
to monasticism.

Five. There was a girl in pink. She said she got
so nervous her heart nearly banged
out through her shoulder blade.

Six. I woke delirious as the blue
of sunrise on the white walls, quiet as dust
in linoleum cracks.

Seven. When you could not follow
"Pied Beauty," I said, *Of course, you're*
tired, I'm sorry. Was I? Right now I'd have you
try again.

Reutlingen

Smoke does not hang
 in graceful coils. The exhaust
of cars has settled
 into the stucco houses,
oily double-tracks in the street.
 Walking this air gives me
headaches; it is twenty minutes
 to the *Omnibusbahnhof*
to catch the eternal city bus
 home. A stone's throw
behind me, F., whom I had taken
 for kind based on his long dark lashes,
starts hooting *Why do you sway*
 your hips like that? His voice
is cruel, says I'm pretending
 to what I don't have, when I am only
walking the way my mother taught me,
 one foot in front of the other.
The mornings are not so bad;
 whenever I don't miss the bus,
gratitude mellows the first half of the ride
 and people's voices sparkle. We jostle
for seats by the heaters, plan intrigues
 to prevent A. from stealing
the show again, act like we can't
 stand the boys. Play tic-tac-toe
on the steamed-up windows, chill
 our fingertips, stamp baby footprints
with the sides of our fists and squabble
 over whose toes are best. When it is
very cold I sit alone in my window
 seat and exhale slow and wide-mouthed
at the frozen condensation.
 A circle melts out to the velvet
before dawn, swallows noise.
 If I make my breath
stop just before the drops begin
 to run, I can watch ice,
returning, eat its crystal counterpoint
 into the black.

Gun Hill, Sunset

Who are You? Catch
in the cardinal's calling,

corner of building
I can see through: layered

lattices, smashed glass:
bright as silica

melting in my eyes. They made
rifles in this defunct concrete once.

Fixed birthplace
of deerslayer, turkeyslayer:

the company has moved
production elsewhere.

In brochures, white-haired
kind-eyed men crack

rifles open gently, bite
cigars. They were to blame

for death by bullets everywhere,
until they had faces. Now

even their factory
has wounds.

An iron grid holds little panes
in the long windows,

frames rusting into lines that move
like melodies plucked on a harp.

Jagged holes
from squirrels and weather

and from objects hurled by hands
that decorated stucco

near ground level (Young?
Arriving at dusk. Flashlights

and aerosol). Homer
Simpson's face is crumbling

off plaster: spray-paint lines
break at my fingertips.

*The face of the moose
is as sad as the face of Jesus.*

Often sadder. Face
of Jesus: people say

the shroud of Turin's marks
came from the sweat

and blood of God.
The earliest known

Pantocrator icon, preserved
at St. Catherine's in Sinai,

was made in the Sixth Century
by an iconographer who ought

geographically never
to have seen the gravecloth:

still his icon is narrow, high-cheekboned,
matching eerily the shroud-print Christ.

Hand raised: gesture of *speaking, teaching*. Face
divided: One side God

judges, the other
mercy

but in the amberbrown eyes
I get lost. Left

nearly weeping
blood, dull, agonized—or is that

fury?—sunken, exhausted.
The right: clear, looking straight

at me. Or you.
So clear I can't say

whether it has an expression.
Not accusing, not

apologizing—is this
God's welcome?—waiting

for me to speak, but I need
a tongue of fire to begin.

There is a residue in my voice
when I say *my God*:

I-know-who-you-are,
I-do-not-know-you-at-all.

Call: Maybe speech
is not what your shrouded gaze

is asking. Call.
Respond.

There are rules
for making icons: Fast.

Pray. Build up layers
slowly. Colors are meaning:

good is beautiful, and true.
Don't measure light

in angles; here the bodies
shine. Do not cast shadows.

Far away St. Catherine's
overlooks desert. Rocks break:

day-burn, night-crush. Each sunrise the hill
where I stand throws darkness

down the valley and across the lake.
Now sunlessness

climbs smoothly toward bright
broken windows. Standing

I see water beyond treetops. Lakes:
how sound carries,

foghorn call of moose. When I look
at arteries in leaves, whose hands

don't I see? What does it mean
that trees will clap? On TV

people weep, getting
bigger diamond rings.

So much dirt
everywhere except

under their fingernails. I want out
over the lake where the moose

bawl for mates. I want hands
like leaves on trees stretched over water

holy, effortless,
facing the sun

that passes through
each morning.

Boston Commons

He said he'd given his last five dollars
to a homeless lady once, so she could do
laundry. He said his brothers called him Session,
because of rap sessions. And weed sessions.
I told him, There's a story in the Bible
about that. Except it was a widow
and her five bucks were two copper coins. But Jesus
saw and turned to his disciples saying,
Did you see the rich guy just before her? With the fat
handful of heavy coins? What she gave
matters more. We talked about the Bible some.
He said, How come—if God came down
and gave it to them on stone tablets, how come
we ain't got those around today no more?
Well, it wasn't, I told him, the whole Bible. Just
the ten commandments, on stone tablets. And he said,
Still. When they find those, that's the day
I'll consider religion. Later, he told me always
to keep smiling: I've heard of a smile saving
someone's life. I nodded, I had too. And with
a smile like yours, he added, who knows
what might happen. I'd been drawing. That's how
it all started: he came over. Whatcha drawin'?
Oh – see the brownish building over there, and
how the street goes in? That tall tan one belongs
right on the left, just that I haven't gotten
that far yet. You're good, he said. You real good.
Thanks. I looked at his headphones. What're you
listening to? My white friend's rap. He's good.
After that, his life leaked out in bits and pieces.
He has a son named after him. He lets
his son's mother live with him so little Shawn
can see both of them every day. It makes dating
hard, having her living there—but man,
you know, it's worth it for my son. He feels
like he killed his grandmother, the one woman
he respected, by going to jail. The cancer'd
come and gone by the time he got out. All
he has now is her burnished brass
key chain with an eagle, and the verse on it
from Isaiah, about soaring.

Flocked Crows, Bookshelves, Wind

I Crow Calls

Ordinary Cawing

Enough for gratitude—that I am there and know it,
carrying ten pounds of apples, buckwheat honey, maple cream.

Failed shortcut through the fields, all mud,
fence angling me sternly right, and right again
right back to where I started
trying to avoid the long way home,
loud wetcold shoulder of the road,
gray blast of trucks. Pneumatic brakes hiss at the wind
which finds my clavicles behind the zipper,
threatens *Should have brought gloves.*

Switch your bag, pocket the free hand; no good.
I'll flash freeze your fingerbones for dinner.

Crows share their *Schadenfreude* with the clouds—

Announcement Call

Crows fly close, perch
in the row of saplings just across the ditch.

Hello there, sister scarecrow. I stop,
stare. One crow sidles closer, shrugs.

That wasn't Schadenfreude: we don't mean to mock.

His branchmate jostles over, almost starts to speak.
—*Never mind them.* This from higher in the tree. *Listen:*
at the blinking orange light, take the mulched path
past the crab apple. Uphill. On summer days your kind
clothe horses' heads with netted masks,
lead them to graze; at night deer come, unled.

You won't see a soul. Starlings hurl themselves
at earth, then sky. Wait for instructions.

Assembly Call

At the top of the hill there is a walnut tree.
The starling-flock swerves into it then scatters, banks,
lands connectedly in the graveyard.
When I look up, the crows are in the walnut.
—*A murder*, the old one says, *what you should call us*
if you want to be literary.—*And if I don't?*—*A flock.*
I set the bag of apples down, pocket my hands.
—*What is it like to have wings?* She looks at me.
—*What do you have in your bags?*—*Apples. Macouns.*
—*It's pronounced 'Ma-cown.'*—*Oh. Thanks. And honey.*
—*Wings: like carrying ten tons of air on each shoulder,*
like the opposite of falling.
Muscle, bone, reach; do not cling.

Immature Hunger Call

Sugarshoulders, the first one was back,
can't help you fly, but want a climbing lesson?
Left hand on the knot in the trunk,
right one on the branch... Oh,
you can't reach. Shame.
Brother, he cocked his right eye
up into the tree, *you found us any dinner?*
The old one ignored them.
—*Is it true*, I asked, *birds*
freeze to death if they eat soft bread,
that it expands in their stomachs
and they can't get enough calories?
—*We are not little birds*, she said.

Adult Food Call

*Once, I told her, I walked across a bridge in winter.
It did not feel as cold as today but the river was solid
and there were dark gray three-toed tracks
in the snow, and patches where the ice was swept clean.*

*The tracks converged, and when I got to the middle of the bridge,
I stepped to the edge to see what drew them in.*

*It was roughly the shape of a bird, outlined in gray,
and on the inside a pinkish gray-orange, with bone splinters.*

*Around its edge bits of inside and outside
were scattered on the track-marked snow.*

—Yes.

—Will you come down and warm my hands?

—Yes. I pulled them out of my pockets.

Contact Call

—Climb on the fence. Put your hands in your lap.

*She landed on my shoulder, foot-grip strong through my coat.
I touched a black knuckle.—Your feet are cold.*

She was not heavy. Small skull, short feathers.

Back slick like the surface of water

*with no wetness underneath; folded wings
small dams on either side. I smoothed them with the backs
of my fingers.—Your feathers are cold.*

—Only on the surface. Put your palms up.

*I laid my hands in my lap. She held out her wings,
stepped down my arm, sat: not feathers but skin on my skin.*

She answered without looking up.

—It is the way we are made: a bare place hidden, to warm.

II Books on the Floor

—You have been staring at the top corner of the bookshelf for seventeen seconds now and I know you are not lost in thought: your shoulders are stiff and there is nothing dreamy in your posture.

—I've been thinking of the overturned pot of chili and the flooded bathtub and my bookshelf knocked completely over—

—These wooden cornered things are strange. I didn't know where to land.

—Yeah, well, you're destroying my things.

—What do you mean by *yours*?

—Doesn't your flock own the walnut? You have control of it?

—You don't have very good control of your bookshelf or your chili or your bathtub.

—When I'm alone here, they do what I want. Let me try again. Do you know you're separate from your flock?

—Right now I am not with them. What is *separate*?

—You're... individual. Not dependent on them for existence.

—Sure I'm dependent on them. I'd die alone.

—But you *exist* independently of them.

—I think I see: individuality is make-believe for *I don't need a flock*.

—I... that's not fair. There is a difference between you and your brother.

—He has a voice like a garbage truck.

—You're right. So do you, sometimes. Though when you're sleepy and sitting on the highest bookshelf, and you puff your feathers till you're nearly round, you murmur sweet little songs...

—and you are almost glad I'm here.

III Watching the Crow

The back of your neck purples
in the light from the window. You stare
out. Your feathers smell of slowly roasted straw
and something like sesame oil. You are perched
carefully between jade trees on the sill,
black claws curved on the hard white wood, one toe
wrapped around the edge. You click
when you walk, like miniature stilettos.

I miss the outside for you. My shoulders itch
as though I could fly forever if I just
got past the walls. If I touched
your back it would feel like long hair in sunlight,
hot as freshly ironed silk.

IV What the Girl Dreams Later

Walking

Head cocked, vivid eye
blazing one hole at a time
in the world. I don't mean
to make people squirm.
Once my gaze catches, how
can I let go?

Hunched slightly from looking so hard.
Heavy hooked thing hanging
from my shoulder blades. You're always
sidling away. Stay near for once.
I know I'm clumsy with my eyes.
I turn too fast; there again
I almost knocked you over. I'm sorry.
My shoulders hurt.

Stop staring. I know I'm not like you.
Lend me your straight long legs
and I will be graceful, gentle to the bone.

Encounter

Who is that
behind me—what is—I feel
so strange, my back
is pulling and my feet
are off the ground—help—
What'd he say? Let go? Spread
out my *what?*—What I would give
for arms! Let me down. Please.

Dear God, we're so high up.
And I can't see your face.

V Sugarshoulders

*Bet high; I'll try
to bully you for all you're worth.
Stand up. I'm the wind.*

You only throw molecules.
Even ice chips
only sting a while.

Lower the blinds. Go out. Lock the front door.

Caress me, wind: today
my coat outsmarts you.
All I feel is soft. You're batting,
don't get in.

*I need your legs
giacommettied: then I'll twist you loose, undo
your feet's gravitied grip
on concrete, carry you like a mirage
above the shining river.*

I'm heavy as a possum.
Happy on the ground.
Go home.

*Let your legs trail. You'll be my human
crane fly. Let me snap
your age, your name off, obsolete appendages.*

I don't want to be
hips and a brain.

*I'll give you stunned black treetops
cluttering the sky—
I'll give you back the windmill.*

It is not yours; you only move
its wings. You're wind.
You would forget
how low I have to be to breathe.

Smoke

Imagine us in a house together,
Borges and Beckett smoking with Kafka
(and you) whenever I look away, air
draped around Part One of Rilke's
"Spanish Trilogy": *From this
cloud, look!...* Then what? Babies
would ruin your life. Wouldn't they?
And you'd return the favor.
I am not being fair. You may know
how to love. Am I this angry?
I thought I had forgiven you.
No, I thought nothing
to forgive.

Imagine us in a car together, music
without words and melodies unless
by melody you mean the large pattern
thought finds in well-placed silences.

Imagine us on a roof together.
In what country? I don't really want
to travel. In New England. What
are we doing? We could be putting down
tar shingles, which last for decades.
We could be smoking
out a nest of raccoons,
though only people tired
of their lives would climb on a roof
with a mother raccoon. We could be—
first I said, leaning back on our elbows,
crossed ankles, streamed shadows.
We could be standing
on top of the house. Staring off, parallel.

The Unnamed Civil Servant's Daughter Addresses Mitya Karamazov

"On one occasion the whole town went on an outing in seven troikas; it was winter, it was dark, and in the sledge I began to squeeze the hand of the girl next to me, a civil servant's daughter, a shy, sweet, poor defenceless little thing."

As you say, you did not *compromise me*; when I married
three months later, he found no marks

because you left none: your kisses in the dark erased.
There is a story about soldiers who leveled

a village carousing: place in their own country,
burned with shouts and dancing, disbelieved

afterwards what they'd done. Next time this village
would know better, if it were not a charred patch by the road,

stones split to show bright insides past their smoke-dark skins.
Your mouth on mine. I began nowhere, ended: hail melting.

At first I thought *So this is kissing*. Then you left, and nothing
stepped back; crowded in. All my life I had lived

unknowingly inside a clear capsule. I notice
now that it's thin to breaking. Do I want

to stop feeling? So close, too close, all over me at once your hands—
Dmitry. *Call me Mitya*. Voice so tender I feared for you,

and that I cannot forgive myself. You felt no ecstasy.
Many girls are kissable, but that's not love, that's trying to forget.

It wasn't trying to forget. Animal hunger, not even; you touched
because you knew you could. I wish my blood had stayed thick

but it seemed to sublimate past gas into spirit—so fast I got dizzy.
You eroded what braced my lungs calmly empty, flamed my ribs.

My cheeks float burning on the frozen wind.
Gentle reproach you saw afterwards

from a distance; I never let you near enough for speech. You knew
I thought you'd call after the troikas, asking to speak to my father.

After the wedding we got on a train.
It was powerful, stopping, hissed fit to scald the whole world

but once we were moving it was just like my heart, churn-clanking
forward, and the pastures streamed by but not nearly as fast

as I had expected. I left the burnt place silently. I do not feel
his hands as I felt yours. The red dish cloth reminds me of you

except when it slips from its hook, lies
bunched on the smooth-worn wood. Then I do not know

what to think of it. I wonder whether I will love
his children, whether I will learn by kissing them to want their father's lips;

I wonder whether their father wants my lips or just a curtained house
and boiled potatoes in a sour cream broth.

When I hate him, I watch him step through the front yard, unlock
the door, and think of adding vinegar to curdle dinner. Other times

his mincing steps awaken all my pity
till I want to kiss the small bare spot high on his head

when he bends to unlace his shoes. Those evenings
I light no lamp in the kitchen when I wash up. Trees stitch themselves

into the solidbright sky while the fields soak up darkness.
If there is meat the air inside hangs thick. The plates

are cool, gelatinous, slip clean in cheap soap and I say
my name to myself softly, till it becomes my own foreign word.

[Biography of Käthe Kollwitz]

- 1867 Käthe Kollwitz is born as the fifth child of Carl and Katharina Schmidt in Königsberg, Prussia (today Kaliningrad, Russia).
- 1881-90 Kollwitz's father discovers her gift for art; she studies with various painters and printmakers in Königsberg and Berlin.
- 1891 Marriage to Dr. Karl Kollwitz; move to Berlin.
- 1892 Son Hans is born.
- 1896 Son Peter is born.
- 1901 Kollwitz begins work on the image cycle "Bauernkrieg," based on the 1524-25 German Peasants' War
- 1904 Beginning interest in sculpture; Kollwitz studies in Paris, visits Rodin.
- 1908 Kollwitz breaks off her relationship with Vienna publisher Hugo Heller, enters period of artistic frustration, begins writing journals at her son Hans's request.
- 1914 Son Peter is killed shortly after the beginning of World War I as a volunteer soldier in Belgium.
- 1921 Grandson Peter is born to Hans; 1923 granddaughters Jödis and Jutta, and 1930 Arne-Andreas.
- 1925 Kollwitz's mother, who had been living with Kollwitz and her family since 1919, dies.
- 1932-33 Kollwitz and her husband sign urgent petitions attempting to unite left-leaning parties and prevent the rise of the National Socialists.
- 1935-36 Kollwitz is unofficially forbidden to exhibit and later interrogated by the Gestapo and threatened with internment for an interview given to a Moscow newspaper.
- 1940 Karl Kollwitz dies.
- 1942 Oldest grandson Peter is killed in Russia.
- 1945 Käthe Kollwitz dies in Moritzburg, days before the end of the Second World War.

Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz

I. Kartuschchen

In one drawing you are smiling
with your head

slightly on one side
and your face cross-hatched

so fiercely it seems your skin
could not look smooth but it does

which is maybe why Karl fell
in love with you that

and the hair you drew
as though it were scrap cloth

wisping and clotted about the head
when in fact it was silky

In your drawings
what are you saying

to your father
who thought you

too plain to marry
In your drawings what

are you saying to me I
avoid self-portraits

because of what I might see
What are you saying

could you not ever smile again
or would you not

in art because of what you had seen

III. *Dreimonatkind*

Always the same, you said: men	<i>At Frau Becker's.</i>
lose their jobs and women	
turn all mother: union strikes	<i>The three-month-old</i>
or alcohol—they do not care.	<i>emaciated covered in flies in the stroller.</i>
Sickness. Beatings. Silence. All	<i>Trudchen still</i>
the same. Even when their men	<i>can't walk,</i>
lie dying	<i>pale and friendly.</i>
they will not relent:	<i>Frau Becker no longer accepted</i>
Do you not see	<i>into the lung sanatorium.</i>
I told you	<i>The husband has work, but makes an embittered impression.</i>
If only you had	<i>Frau Becker always</i>
Look at your children	<i>with the same friendliness and gentleness.</i>

IV. *Eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe*

Beauty will lie; grandfather taught me not to let it say
the thing it wants to about other people's pain.

Gifts are not hard to give away

once you've made up your mind.

I thought I did not pray, but drawing
is surrender. Listen, ladies: beauty lies

in these worn faces. Stop your games
of manners and disguise; you bore me.
Watch out or you'll give yourself away

by your coiffed hair and empört nose.
You'll make our posters for us: your disdain
as backdrop for the girl picking a flower

from the Abfluss. Beauty drew me first,
but now I watch Karl's waiting room.
Each day the figures seem more bent.

Black and white in many copies: what I give away
is fighting. Bleary eyes, her needle up, through,
underneath. Children asleep next to her lamp.

V. *Land der Dichter und Denker*

It was not until much later Goebbels said
Screw democracy the people will follow anywhere
their leaders call Vaterlandsliebe, call

security. You didn't say Screw Vaterlandsliebe. Karl
spoke quietly to Hans, Let me go instead.
It was just the three of you
that sunny afternoon. Peter
had been gone four years. You said you saw
on Hans's face that he felt buoyant, as you did. You went home
together. Hans said Vater,
ich kann das nicht annehmen.
I had not known, you said, what could be
between human and human.

You drank wine and read Goethe
and Schiller aloud. "Wiederfinden," "Siegesfest," "Selige
Sehnsucht." You emptied the glasses and set them
away, bound by one ribbon: next time

we are together

VI. *Selbstportrait*

You carried yourself like a worker,
did not hide. I am not like you.

Even if I finish all ten pounds
of your diaries I will not know.

Each evening my
trying-to-be-beautiful ends

in a smear, blackish and brown
on a tissue in the trash

VII. *After Drawing “Mutter und Sohn” at the Museum*

Are those furrows only age? where is the fierce,
hunched look I cross-hatched heavy in my sketchbook?
I am listening when I read your journal,
I am eavesdropping. Photographs: you
on a bench, hands in your lap, loose blouse
light as your hair. Staring away. Images
of your art: the mother's face shadowed black.
Am I trying to earn a friend-across-time,
kernel of who you were sixty-some years
ago transmitted—to my eyes? My brain.
Heart. Palm, because I feel your son's dead
fingertips. I saw your bronze: her forehead
clotted, knuckles clenched to mouth. Now I find
you meant her thoughtful, thought her beyond pain.

VIII. *Ohne Modell*

Eventually you knew our bodies so well
you could work without models; such ease
you said then, such joy. Drawings
flooded from you. Some of your comrades gave us words
in their pictures—Erwin, close the window,
my work's getting sooty.—Ach Mutta,
dat riecht heute wieder mächtig fein
nach den fettigen Roosh vons Krematorium!

You rarely gave us words, and yet to see your lines
was to hear. The Kaiserin saw
and wouldn't come to the home workers' exhibit
until that woman was removed—that poster—
those bones in her cheeks, slack

irises half-focused, flooded
with shadows weighed down
by the heavy black lids

IX. *Pietà (Mutter mit totem Sohn)*

She-bear beaten
locked in around him
hold holding holding holding

Käthe you say it is not for his sake

the holding like this you say
it is wrong

§

you made her small
you made her
a foot high

§

you cover his eyes

he has fallen into
your lap you cannot carry
his weight

with one paw you cover

your other hand is human
your upturned
palm supports his
fingertips

§

Käthe I say
at one angle her forehead your
forehead shines smooth

his quiet
fingers cupped
in your palm
 then light
aslant the same
forehead clenched

mouth
clamped to the back
of your thumb

§

much later they needed a Denkmal,
think-marker, made her larger than life said *stand*
for all the victims set her

in Berlin into the pillared
marble where the soldiers used to
watch

her dead son
lean back against her

§

somewhere you wrote
it is no longer pain just
sensing-after Nachsinnen

he is there
in your arms
 in your face

X. *You Left Eight Hundred Printed Pages' Worth of Journals*

Frieda Winckelmann disappears
in database searches behind J. J.
Winckelmann
who is supposed to have invented art history,
and then behind the Frida with no e,
Communist pedagogue and politician
who died three years later than she

whose pieta Käthe said was *Akin to mine only in the way the mother holds the son's dead hand.*
greater art than her own, had peace, real joy. *Mine is not religious.*
This was while Frieda lay dying, sickness *In the son her work and mine are more similar, but hers is better.*
returned though it had seemed overcome. Strong *The head of the Mary is not empty, as Hans called it—it is lifted.*
willed, winged by her Catholic faith, *My Mother stays contemplating her son's rejection.*
carried by friends, at the end *Winckelmann's does too, but is also Queen of Heaven.*
she made her best work. I can't find, now, *Frieda Winckelmann was surely of the same opinion, though she said*
what medium her pieta was in. *nothing.*

On the 12th I was still with her. She was very limp but full of compassion.
On the 13th L. rang me up. She had come to her as the clergyman prayed.
She was partially unconscious.
Once it had seemed as though she were recognizing L. Then closed the eyes again.
Today early the head nurse told me she had fallen asleep.
She said she had maybe never seen such a gentle death.

XI. *Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden*

Looking back on

Your eyes are exhausted. All water
has dried, they say, ten thousand years
could not give back what is lost.

the time in Belgium, what is most beautifully in my memory

And yet. Is that what they say? Gifts and tasks given:
sometimes I think it is peace in your eyes. You wore
your grandfather's confident, unselfconscious mouth, kept

of all his lessons the one that told you how to work.
Old, you drew yourself seated with Karl,
in profile, his two hands resting

on a walking stick. You both look the same
direction. "Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände
Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende!"

is the last afternoon

Your diaries begin by describing
your house, cramped and too quiet,
comparing your sons: male teenaged silence

will descend on Peter even earlier
than it has on Hans. But years later
you remember summer nights

when the air rang with children's playing,
when you'd call him in, late, and he would joke
and dance around your calling, climb

upstairs finally, heated and sticky with games,
in the short gray suit with the white collar,
wiping damp hair out of his eyes.

when van Hauten drove us there once more. He left us alone

Those figures: who will accept from me
only silence. Their wordless bare
rigidity. Their future

and we went from the figures to Peter's grave

You wrote him long letters, the first year. Help me stay true,
you said, uncolored. On Karfreitag you wrote
This was his day, when he celebrated spring, took Faust,

went off in silence and came back
with willow catkins tucked into his shirt.
It took you years, you said, to find

the place where Goethe writes
those words that are your son's:
"Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken."

He was eighteen.

and everything was alive and wholly felt.

Bombs smashed your Atelier. But Hans lived
to lose you.
And Karl survived to old age.

I stood

Your lips have given themselves
away. Goethe, you said, reminded you of your duty
to joy. The parents kneel.

In 1918, you copied out a passage from Rodin's book
on cathedrals. He says he wants to take them in,
but there are no artists living who can stand

next to the carpenters and masons: she is too big,
Le Mans, stone friend. She stands free
as trees, and some day in the middle of his worries

he'll see she's taken root, is whole: the too-close
light that blinds
will then illuminate.

before the woman, saw her—my own face—wept

Käthe. Come
sit with me. No;
no. I am afraid.

and stroked her cheeks

They called you Malweiber,
painting bitches, at the Zeichenschule
für Damen in Berlin. Bareheaded,

fetching alcohol from a pub to thin your paint,
you proved your decadence to the city:
In the morning already they drink

Karl stood close behind me—I didn't know it at first.

In your last house, Goethe's death mask hung
above your bed and in the daytime you sat measuring
wind in the trees with a compass, writing down words

I heard him whisper:

Stray bullets; madness. Black hands cast into the sky. Pitchforks flooding right to
left.

“Ja, ja.”

Selbstgespräch mit Franziskus
[Interior Monologue with Francis]

Look here: I know they were bored
stiff. Also, expecting food. And when I blew
into their nostrils, they didn't really think

§

I always thought
I had a wild side
something that rolled its *rrr*'s
and roamed ravenous searching
for anything so ecstatic
it would make surrender
the only
obvious choice

but if I have an alter ego
I am afraid it is mostly *Hausfrau*

they didn't really think
I was telling them secrets. *Liebe*
geht durch den Magen. But the tan one
(uneven cut on her forehead
frozen pale pink, which will fill
eventually with white hair) stayed
past nosing my coat,
let me rub the narrow bones
above her nostrils, scratch an itch
in the hollow

§

what if I
could hear them
outside my window
whimpering what if
there were nothing
at all I
could do what

if there were
would I in
the night even
if it meant
I'd be standing
barely able beaten
with them as
night ends tomorrow
our moans *Flügel*
der Morgenröte

hollow of her throat, press
my fingers in small circles
down the ridge of her mane—*kraulen*
is the word I mean— and stepped
closer, eyes half closed,

§

In the gospels, when a rich
young ruler comes to Jesus, asks
What must I do other than keep
God's law, Jesus says Sell all you have,
then follow me. The man in the gospel
leaves, crestfallen. Franz, you stayed:
of course it was mostly your father's,
what you sold, and without asking
which seems somewhat problematic,
though when you relinquished
your inheritance I think that counts.
Bales of silk and brocade,
the beautiful stuff they stitched
into robes for priests

half closed, arched her neck
over the fence and moved her lips
toward my shoulder to reciprocate. I swiveled
slightly out of range—fillies will put teeth
into massage. The tall one with the profile
of a mule nosed in. In summer

§

(Probably it is not true about the wolf
you tamed, the one who was tearing
live people limb from limb and then
eating them and when you came
to that town they said Please do not go
you will die but you went
to the woods, spoke sense to him, said Be
at peace I will provide you with food
from now on. So the dogs
did not bark when the wolf
went door to door
eating scraps, and he died
two years later of old age)

In summer he will be coal-color, sleek. Here
in the evening light his winter hairs glow red
before they come to their black tips. Sun
pours through his ice-gray lens—such

§

You went naked to the woods
a scandal a crazy a smiling
silent boy tending lepers, unfazed
utterly by the taunts; Frenchie

they'd called you before but now
Fiancé of Poverty, and if

we call Her holy today it is at least
partly your fault

though you'd say you only loved
what was beautiful; but how
is it beautiful to go about in burlap
barefoot in snow rebuilding tiny churches

and how was it that your friends, fops, sons
of rich men too, began to straggle
to your homemade building site,
take off their shoes

such big eyes you have, so clear, lashes little wings
along the lid—he's headshy but keeps coming back

§

I cannot stop thinking about you
how cold you must be at night
how hunger has deepened
past emptiness, a trembling pledge,
weakness the weakness of love,
each wound a place to start anew

I line my windowsills
with potted plants
and if I go out
I wear well-padded
winter boots

I am embarrassed
when I think of you

back to breathe, close
and closer so long
as I keep my hands off.
Steam from our lungs
between us, sun reddening
toward earth's hungry curve

Dürer Darling

Revelation of St. John

I have been told you are apocalyptic.
I can see wanting to think about last things: fear,
then obsession. *Brimstone* sounds ridiculous,
but this is different: there are no devils
in your etchings. It is the angels who are scary,
the Christ with sword-tongue.
You were pyrotechnically in love
with disaster. Small wonder Martin Luther
impressed you; you knew
what he was afraid of.

Conjoined

Anything deformed was worth a trip;
scientific interest of course: your drawing
is still cited as evidence
for the dicephalous baby today.

You'd have loved horror movies.

The Hare

Almost-curls stroked
in tiny gouache brushstrokes.
Not lush ones, though;
you saved those for yourself; just fur
gone damp and dried. An ad
for my favorite radio station
subtitled it *Peter brooded,*
having been left out
of the carnival of the animals.

Horses

What did you teach in your workshop?
One not-exactly-gentleman left,

did knockoffs of your classic white horses.
He gave the big one, seen from the rear, an evil glare
at the viewer, who may also note the groom
unconscious on the floor. The small one
comes up in a series, where pale horses graze,
get frisky in a forest; not to be missed
is the front and center stallion,
pupils tense, fully erect in one picture, kicked
by the mare he was eyeing in the next,
in the third foaming his semen on the ground.
His penis with the foreskin drawn back
looks like a lamprey,
vicious flat mouth.

Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand Christians

All the naked Christians have beautiful skin,
and the ones being pushed backward off the cliff
(it's not a very big cliff, but there's a nasty thorn bush
at the bottom) have charming loincloths. The headless
and about-to-be-headless in the foreground look well-fed,
and two of the ones on crosses have their arms trussed
above their heads in a comfortable-looking position.
At the far left of the picture is the third crucifix,
seen in profile, and this man has a shirt on,
from which legs protrude that might be bloody,
in a dried-and-crusted way. His arms are splayed
and tied at the wrists, legs hunched along the center pole
of his cross, where there is no foothold
to ease the cramps in his rib muscles
that paralyze his lungs. The thorn bush
isn't the only thing under the cliff.
There's a dog licking up blood
next to a pile of chalky bodies,
warm-colored ones thudding on top
and a clothed man,
axe raised high.

Wing

Are you really German? Such
colors—those birds
don't come to Germany even in the summer.

I've lived where you're from
so I know—where did you get the turquoise
in that sandy-banked lake?

Same place your countrymen
today get their six-week vacations.

What would you have done
in a cubicle—staged the end of the world,
burned down the building?
Or been docile,
sat dreaming of Italy, imagined yourself
with endless glossy curls?

Self-Portrait

In the teenaged self-portrait you have limp
straight hair like mine, hair that won't do
ringlets like the ones you gave yourself at twenty-nine;
I remember hair oiled and coiling
from under a velvet beret
as though incapable of stringy flatness.

Checking now there's no
beret; in fact the hair at the crown
of your head is believably stringy.
There are gashed sleeves, but smaller
than I thought, and your robe
is just brown. My book says
you're posed as Christ.

The Artists's Mother

Did she change? Or did you?
Were you afraid your eyes would drift apart?
Your mother's must have—
you did a picture of her young,
not thirty judging by the tiny crows' feet.
What age were you then, ten?
Already good with oils.
Peach-rosy lips, delicate eyebrows
raised in thought; the faint line
descending crookedly across her forehead

is the only clue she could become the skew-eyed
creature in the later pencil sketch,
head low as though about to charge.

For a Daughter

Don't use barbed wire
to enclose horses. Their ears spike
to attention if you rustle something as you pass.
Hold out the red, white, round mints
you pocketed, forgot. Palms flat.

Be careful but don't be afraid; most horses
are only violent in fear. Like this: make
your hand smooth, the sugar
in the middle. If your hands are salty,
they may lick your palm. Their tongues
aren't like a dog's, won't leave you slimed.
Bigger and damper than a cat's. Not long
and ropy as a cow's. They're most
like human tongues, but stronger, thicker.

Spread your hands wide. Look
at your fingers, the white
oak alone on the breast-shaped hill,
guarding the miniature horses.

§

I knew a stallion once who grabbed
his groom (six-foot, two-fifty) by the shoulder,
threw him clear across the stall.
Broke seven ribs.

Who knows but the groom
had beaten him. He was Arabian,
the stallion, chestnut with a blaze
and one white stocking. It is hard to know
what's going on inside them—fear,
pain, malice. He bucked
when my mother tried to make him side-step
and she said he must be hurting;
six months later he died of a twisted colon.

Hard to know and harder to help.
Pico was one of the geldings, sharp
at getting out of work. He died

of liver cancer, the vet said afterwards.
We watched him stand in his stall for days, head
wedged fiercely in the corner,
frozen with pain.

One mare my mother loved
was light bay, tender-mouthed,
soft-gaited, smart as she was beautiful.
She shied at her shadow just to feel her grace.
Only my mother and the stable owner rode her.
Her foals all had high hopes
pinned to them, then died spectacularly
before the age of two: Winnetou bit a barbed fence
and panicked at the pain, tangled
his mouth and then his body,
thrashed so hard they had to put him down.
She had half a dozen gorgeous kamikaze colts
then the breeders gave up.

Pull

I

Heart's thumping ruthless, no time
to undo the clotted necklace, solve the fly's
muttered attacks. All night I've followed you
like a devoted thing, panting low at your heels.
I heap up words on your doorstep like rats
freshly dead.

II

Back at this house with its tiny,
smooth-muscular loudmouth dogs,
ironing boards that won't fold, mirrors
that show me my face
from the lips on down.

III

Beware the towering
enchantment of tree-frog song:
it shimmers the whole brain
useless. The sky twists
out of grasp, presses itself
to the ground.

Smoke

It was hot and every morning I woke
wondering why the air was electric. From our hill,
we could watch purple lightning storms on the pink
Sangre de Cristos.

At home

I charcoaled your face onto a painting, using
the one clear photograph I had, in which you look
wild and silent. You would have held your wine glass gracefully
but were pacing

the fringes of the opening-night
reception, looked out over the crowd like a mountain animal
considering domesticity. What is there to say? I was afraid of you
at first. Maybe always. No smoke

without a fire.

There was a steep
hill behind the dormitories; one morning at sunrise I climbed it,
thinking I would stumble upon the hiking trails I had been told ran off
into the distance.

Round-topped hills, ravines,
everything balding. Charged sagebrush. You never mentioned
a lover, only a girl who had twisted
your arm to bring back something turquoise. I asked you point
blank, months later, what we were doing. *Doing? What
do you mean?*

Speak

for yourself. Am I slandering you? I am not objective. I sold
the painting with your face in it, almost

mailed you

a slide but people had asked for photographs
when you walked around Manhattan, and you'd always
turned them down. A makeover-show hostess cornered you once
and tried to convince your date to get you to go on the show: *I can just see him—cut
that hair, a suit...*

Your eyes coaled

fierce when I laughed. I stopped calling
after the third try (months in between) when your voice mail spoke so quiet
it cut: *Hello. Leave*

a message.

Departure

Your shoulders: blades
against my knees.

Attention. My palms,
your hair. *For security reasons,*

do not leave. Thumbs
smoothing lines

from your forehead.
Do not accept.

Small evening grit.
Items from unknown

persons. I am surprised
by the give

of your temples.
Unattended.

You have porcelain
edges beneath your eyes,

like rims on the cups
you made me, narrow, without

handles, thrown so thin
sun glows through:

closed eyelids
but cream-colored.

Luggage.
Cushion of your cheeks

before the rough.
How does my face

feel under your hands
when we trade off?

Is subject to.

Your thumbs, pure sensation,

pressure and slide.

Immediate. Gentle

over unprotected skin,

teaching me ecstasy can mean

knowing the harm

one chooses not to do.

Collection and search. Thrill up past
my ears when you reach

the slip of muscle on my jaw.

What are we doing alone

together? Do not

May *Leave* *Be*

damaged or destroyed.

December

Dear little girl in the light aqua sheath skirt
with hair a silky housemouse color
wearing a dusty purple coat with maroon piping:
can I get beyond describing your clothes?
The color of your skin does not matter—
though I did think, Maybe I looked like that once.
Of course the color of your skin
matters; still it is not your skin or your skirt
that rooted you here in my mind
standing so still. I am standing
making noise in the group of carolers.
At first I was afraid you'd catch me staring.
Have you never seen adults singing?
But you're looking beyond us,
do not seem to feel my eyes on you at all.
Maybe you are tired of your family, relieved
just to be left to stand and stare
through singing into something else.

We do not sound transfixing.
Do we?

I feel naked as a bell freshly cast.

Are you breathing? Make sure you breathe.
I went on a field trip to a glassblower's once and Nicky,
who was built much more sturdily than you are,
fell over with a thunk
just as the man was pulling ears and a tail
out of the glass horse's body.

Ears and a tail. I have a little mouth-blown horse
upstairs, pale peach and much less fragile
than it looks. Much harder than the tiny wood-carved fawn
an old woman offered me from a box full of treasures: Choose.
You are not robbing me, her face said, I want you
to have it. Anything here. It was the smallest thing,
in the bottom corner, and I barely
dared breathe picking it up. Its frail joints
were shiny with glue even then.
I can't remember whether the legs have broken since

and been repaired, or whether they are like my fake
front tooth: the real one snapped on the black and white
entry-hall floor when Benjamin twisted my arm
behind my back and tripped me, after I pushed him
for cutting in line. The dentist fixing it said
This won't stay on long, I'd guess, it's
only plastic, glued. But it has stayed.
I cried when the tooth broke: terror
of irrevocable damage,
shock of air on bare nerve.
I learned fast closing my mouth made it better.

Have you ever made dolls
from poppy flowers? Mouth closed
made me think of it. Hay fever found me,
twelve, in a field of wild poppies. Gradual
closing of the sinuses, eyes puffing stiff.
Poppies are tricky, petals
hardly hatched then they die. You must find
a perfect flower, crepey red
still new. Then an old one,
ovary ripe: this is the bodice.
Really you're making a dress.
Fingernail X the base, attach
your fourpetalled beauty upside-down.
You'll never find a skirt so flimsy,
so red, so much like skin.
What I didn't know while my eyes watered:
they're veterans' flowers
because they grew first on the graves.

That was summer. This
is Christmastime: so say the songs
we are singing. There is red in here too:
pennybright pot on its tripod, stuffed
with coins and dollars. Small
warrior between us and people
passing: diet rootbeer, lightbulbs, bread
in their wire shopping carts. Which side
is it protecting? When I arrived
someone was ringing the tinny bell, till I said
Is this driving anybody else stark staring mad?
In the silence I felt rude
and jangled and when you
walked up, was half afraid the tin

might bite your fingers pressing in the bills.
You do not seem to think us dangerous.

How long have we been at war? Do poppies
bloom on graves along the Tigris? Will they ever
on Saddam's grave, or is his cemetery
groomed and watered, weeds and sand kept out?
In the jumpy black and white video, Hussein
in his Shroud, Viewer Discretion Advised,
his face is bruised and silent.
I do not understand the numbers of dead.

So much death
just outside Christmas carols.
So much death just inside grocery stores.

When I was seven my father asked me
what life is. I looked at him impatiently: Things
are alive or they aren't. But how can you tell,
he asked. Well, when they're dead
they don't breathe. Is breath
life then? No—when things are dead
their hearts don't beat. Is a heartbeat
life? I don't think so.

What is dead
about the inside of this grocery store?
The pastels on the card rack
straight across the aisle do not breathe.
I begrudge the Care Bear's yellow,
feel betrayed by his smile. Cuts of meat
I can't see. Would I eat them
if I had to kill chickens myself? I don't believe
the vegetables are screaming. But it's
the people whose deadness
surprises me. It's us.

We're singing in the odds-and-ends space
front and center of the store, where they keep
non-staples, bright plastic, things
you don't need. Sparkly foils: poinsettias
displayed haphazardly, earth spilled at our feet.

Before you got here, I requested "I Wonder as I Wander"
but it's so steeply minor everyone lost heart after three bars.
We are emphatically not out under the sky.

Are you sad? I imagine; when I hold still
like that I usually am. Sad,
but not dismal: I think you feel sky above you
past the high cheap roof.

There's your sister tugging your hand,
your father with the eggnog.
Dear little girl in the light aqua sheath skirt,
thank you for the tone of your listening.

Smoke

My tongue is covered in the crushed aftertaste of chocolate. On the radio
the flutes never forget they are cylinders of trembling air cut by lips

sharpened to a singing edge. I am not waiting for you to call. Are there
new versions of you? This one breathes deeply, awaking,

does not snore. This one has irises like round glass knives.
This one makes my shoulder sing when touched. Everything sings

if you know how to breathe on it: direction, velocity. Sun
breathed on the lilies for one day and now the blossoms

are all shriveled. I hear coneflowers are hardier, though they've always looked
timid to me, chastised, as though they had their petals blown back from their faces

by a roar from directly above. Maybe they were brazen once, reached shamelessly
as though the sky could fall in love with them. The sky, seeing their foolishness,

spoke in a roar, reduced each to one terrified eye. Lilies have their day:
on May 1st everyone carries shy fistfuls along streets in France. Taste: flower,

root, stem, fruit-bulb. Say *medicinal* if you're afraid of *poisonous*. Lilies
will grab you by the heart: skip, stammer. But it only takes one day of sun

and they are dead. I am afraid of the sky. Today I'll dead-head my maybells,
ask the neighbors for coneflowers and brew blossom-rhizome tea. I'll drink it

very hot and think, How strange that no one seems to know where *Mayday*, the
distress call,
came from. It wouldn't be May 1st, and *M'aidez* is not how to call for help in French.

I am hungry with tiredness. In the kitchen a knife gurgle-clinks
through the jam. The solo flutist etches a melody into my lungs. Phone connections

got crossed sometimes when we talked: you were out
in the middle of nowhere. There was a cough once in the line

followed by silence, then a woman's voice, scraped raw with age.

January

Afternoon: the world
seems not to know about the thaw. The trees
aren't buying warmth, lean

in longsuffering silence
at this new cruelty of winter's,
which pretends to have lost

the train of its thought, dreamed of Mexico,
where trees need not keep their sap frozen
till March to survive. The water's tickling

has not moved the beeches to soften
their tight spikes, though I wonder
whether the peach trees over the hill

will be as wise. In Chicago,
the daffodils are above ground.
The birds appear too stunned to sing;

one quiet muskrat paddles its tail
close to shore, where the ice
has turned gray and retreated.

Strange: freezing and unfreezing
go the same direction, start
in the reeds, head into the lake.

Not strange: the ground adjusts first
to the air; they taught us that in physics:
one thousand calories to warm

one kilogram of water one degree.
Same number whether you watch
or not, though I'd be dead

if I had sat here staring at the ice
and waiting for its soggy vanquishment
from when it formed until today.

No one is pranking the trees. Winter
has dropped its scepter; the snow cover
is wholly inadequate or it would not gape,

after one day of straight talk
from the sun, into open patches
already discovering green.

What You Said When You Turned

I have thought of you and wondered
about the way you touched me,
the way I sometimes moved
away or stiffened
sometimes stayed, did
what you said, *lay*
your head here.

Once I helped you carry drums,
stands to a van's open
doors, stood waiting
while you crawled in to stack.
You closed one door,
and in the pollen-covered glass
I saw my shoeless feet, hem
of my dress moving along night air.
You turned then stopped

before continuing, breath
caught.

Smoke

Last night I made you
kiss me, but it seemed wrong,
even in imagination, without
your consent. So I straightened
my arm, pressed my palm
into your shoulder, sent you spiraling,
weightless, away.

Ropes unhinged
that had bound you
like a hot air balloon
with no passenger basket, just
the gas burner roaring
into the slender, bright mouth
straining up. Go on, rise
offward, skyward, be a tiny emptiness
between the clouds and sea,
a toy and then a spark.

Firmament

Man works at an airport. German song—Above
the clouds the freedom must be borderless. A plane
takes off, shakes the asphalt, makes him watch till it gets lost
in veils of rain. Someone in the staff lounge brews hot coffee.
He admits to rainbowed gasoline *wär gern mitgeflogen*,
would have liked to fly along.

There is liquid on the concrete
at the foot of the stairs in the alley: a smear of sky.
Just think, if houses
and pavements and tree bark were reflective, how much light
there'd be down here.

§

Down here. Not made of atoms but particular.
Not clouds, not cotton candy, sweet water, circles.
Not complete. Not the flat crackling sheen
I peel helplessly off birches, leaving pale apricot scars.
Not a thing, but touchable. Not holdable except by God.
Nebuchadnezzar had a soul even when his wits
had scattered out the tips of his wild hair,
escaped his clawgrown fingernails.
Soul is not optics. *Soul ≠ rainbow*.
Rainbow ≠ Noah, though if Noah, flood, God,
then *rainbow = promise*.

§

My rainbow means: come find me hidden in the gray—
hidden to spare your nearly senseless, fragile self.
Yes, you. I have tried ten thousand ways of calling.
Can you hear me (bits and pieces) with your eyes?
I call to show you why to see.
Look for the nook of cloud, catch color
you have never known till now. I will close in
like music moving through your ankle-bone:
beat, counterbeat, throb, marrowed harmony.
Try: give the color and the melody
one name.

§

One name. I do not want to speak to you
in capitals. It feels like shouting,
makes you enormous, vague, far-off.
You are enormous and far-off: unlike,
all-powerful. You are everything
that makes capitals necessary,
deserves terror, justifies refraining
from address entirely, keeping
my unclean, inadequate mouth off words
that claim to name you. And yet
you call.

§

You call. *You're* hiding? I thought I was the one.
I will come looking, carry my concealment
wrapped and curtained through the clouds.
I'm sprung from shiny cracks, slipped webs,
intricate failures. I fear your unknown color
will mean seeing through, unsafe. Skullbone, aorta,
soul. Do they belong together? What if Hell
is knowing what you mean? Pale apricot scars
on my palms invisible unless I open,
show you. Can this place be touched?
Will I survive?

§

Survive believing: I am not Martin Luther,
shaking in coarse socks at thoughts of Judgment,
therefore brave beyond reason facing lesser threats.
My growing up was filled with repeated
Jesus loves you's, his with descriptions
of eternal implements for torture.
He knew uncounted varieties of *burn*,
knew that alone the gaze of God
can kill. His father was vicious
but his mother doted on him.
So we both end terrified
of the love of God.

§

The love of God: I am not single-minded. I fear every petty thing you can imagine: embarrassment, ugliness, dishes that begin to smell. I want my vanities affirmed, do not want virtue. Is it true you made me to be more than the hawk who carried that limp creature into the chestnut yesterday? It was so quiet, the swoop, the flying off. I feel like less most days, ungraceful, dishonest. I know I am failing all the time at goodness, at unselfishness. Apparent success just means somebody needing what I want to give.

§

What I wanted: as a child, the things I cared about were sleek, slender-ankled. I gave up on cloud-shapes when I realized anacondas in the sky are bunchy, ragged, and that if you find something four-footed one leg is stumpy, another bends the wrong way, one may move into delicate poise but not before the last one glides toward dissolving. Cloud-shapes are not for finding what you know you want. They are unkempt promises I barely understand.

§

Barely. School afternoon: cloud-cover brighter than this paper. Trees like licorice, clumped leaves like pocket-squashed chocolate. Even through glass I know the smell: earth-rot, slimed roots. Paintbrush between my lips like moss, cold lace, against my tongue. Grainy black too light for trees, paper too heavy.

Dump the destickered pickle-jar, rinse, re-fill: this is as clear as water gets. The page shines wet. "Aren't the clouds even a little gray?" I close my eyes and tree-sky shapes flicker, gold and veiny. I know water evaporates, will leave me wrinkled, duller than before. I dip my brush.

§

Dip. Rise. Clouds are all the same stuff: steam.
Sometimes, free of ripples, lakes reflect
like quicksilver or plastic wrap. The sun
moves catlike up my lap, settles with infinite precision.
Dear airport man, you aren't missing much. These planes
are sealed so thick it barely feels like flying. Looking out
reminds me I will never walk those gleaming clefts.
It's wet out there. Unsolid. At least from the ground
there are more colors I can catalogue; no daydream,
just a list. Charcoal, slate, periwinkle,
mango. Sky.

§

Sky. Command the shoulderbones, Stop growing spurs
that pinch the nerves off, numb the arms. What right
have I to order?—not my shoulders, not
my lover's. What right? How foolish. Humans
get promises in the Bible, covenants
they usually break. But even Job—when God
finally responds, rights slip into thunder. Answers? Not
hardly. Jesus ordered storms around,
drowned in injustice when it came
to his own body. Neither my lover's
nor mine. Breaking.

§

Breaking. Shoulderbonespurs:
gentle violence as violence goes,
taking another family's father
apart. His little girl is afraid of him
in hospice. Isn't pain pain,
death death? No. Silence the dead
with words or without; the dying
remain inconsolable—you among them.
The sayable is puny, indecent.
Use your voice; the inarticulate
sometimes rings true.

II

Lise und Markus

Lise und Markus: Home

The stairs will eat me. Everyone is leaving. Listen, Honey, I'm home.
Markus. Behind the doorway they sneer, My smock—look, it's torn; today I tried
wearing only their faces. rolling all over the paintings ... Lise darling
What of kisses. hold me
If you dare come near me I am desperate. The faces on my canvases
I know by the force of your heels on the floor terrify me. Where are they coming from?
it is too late. Laundry grows stale in our closet. Lise, Lizzie—Listen!
Go bury the socks. Lisbet. Stop it. Hör doch—
Do not touch me or I will come close. Please
what will I? I don't know. I am lonely for you. Touch me.
It does not matter; Everything will change.
what you touch is not me. Help me be home.

I'm upset. You're upset.
I'm making fun of you. You're making fun of me
Everything— again. I don't understand. Nothing
is different. has changed. I am only me
Who are you? here, back from work.
You smell Lise? How am I so strange
of many poisons. to you? Mmm, what are you cooking—
This place is not home.
Not when you come from there. Lise. Remember. The studio.

Not Heim. Unheimlich. Dachau. It is the only town near Munich I can afford. Look, it's not like you have to live here. You don't even have to go—

I want to go along. All the tables are covered in oil paint.

I'm scared, and work— There's one chair and half a window
all day children cut off by the partition. What would you do,
rocking sick what would Dr. Mohn say if you just didn't show up?
at the mouth You're healing people, Lise,
helping them talk.

Talk. Talk. What If I was wrong, They need you.

Markus, when I agreed you should rent

space there? I am tired

You say yourself of this argument.

the faces terrify. Yes. But

Sick people. they're gone.

I can't help them.

Whatever they were wearing They were cold

however thin They were alive. I know.

It is not possible the distance so short.

Do you remember

we visited How could I not remember:

It was

It isn't anymore.

Lise: Der Mond ist Aufgegangen

I got off the bus two stops early
walked home along the Landstrasse.

You know the place
where pastures slope into the valley?
Just outside the carlights' sideways reach
there were eyes up waiting
to see if I am as blind as I look.
I almost was, but thought I saw
a taut-cupped ear:
 one crunch
toward the fence and they're off,
down the steep dark.

Their hooves leave sounds
like a fast heart's
arrhythmia on the turf.

Lise: Married

Your hair is red and your voice
full of gravel. The skin
around your eyes is ashen blue.
As you look down
your lashes are white
unsleeping butterfly wings

Markus: Homesick

Rusty truck
in radiant fall trails skeins
of the blue in mother-of-pearl

Lise, where your mother
keeps the washer in the basement:

that room's smell is cruel to me,
plays touch, abandon:
first fraction of an inhale
sweeps me back to Iowa,
moist-cement clean, Tide—
but even Tide is different here.
You boil out stains instead of
bleaching,
and the full inhale leaves me forlorn,
disoriented on my cold bare feet.

No skunks here, wolves, tornadoes,
forest fires. Earth is so tame
contained and parceled.
Even your oceans touch
gently: long shallow
tide-flats, never cliffs.

Your deer save me.
Licking salt in wintertime,
in summer slim wild specks,
far off in fields gone mad
with flowers. See?
Right where the trees
begin.

Lise: Akt

This is not what I wanted

I wanted you
to know without needing
to be told

Buy me
a charcoal-grey
compact sturdy light-weight umbrella
that is what I want
all I want
for my birthday

Stop
with your chalk and your dark things
on the light paper

leave my shape alone, my eyes
stop pretending you are

touching me with those lines

Riddle

matches lose their heads over it
then it goes down in flames slowly
watch: it stops time

Markus and Lise: Evening

Lise bitte Match:

Lise listen to me please	a tearing
I am afraid to come home	sound of wings flailing
you stand and wash dishes	air attacks
how are there so many	a small bright
why do I feel you'd do anything	vacuum
to have your back to me	

Lise Dreaming: Leaves

Have we met? How did air

I have forgotten and gravity begin
we are not alone their extensive collaboration?
The leaves want in Do you hear them?

Listen Markus
The street is wetcold why are you not listening?
they scud, scrape You are asleep
I ought to be.
wear out crawl Middle of the night.

Tomorrow I will tell you

tired

as a rattler's old skin

my swollen eyes will probably
Please help dampen, ridiculous, signal

this is the time to close

scrrscrrrr on the sidewalk
listing

What does it mean? You say *I'm going* as though I did not know
now

flesh of my flesh

Soft motor-whoosh: black treads
leave me connected, clinging
to my tiny skeleton
of dried-out veins

tears make you want
to disown me—

In the morning
it will be all right—

I feel like I will blow away
no hands
to hold myself in place

Sleep far.

Light will invade, lie
sharp against gutter-edges
spiny trees, cut
into outlines

Showers, thick coffee
comforting poor thin air.
I will be
grateful to you
just for opening your eyes
breathing
a waking man's breaths

Tiergarten 4, Berlin

Markus, there was an exhibit at the cathedral:
posterboards everywhere
with photographs and print—they moved
even the pews. It was an exhibit
about the church's failure.

Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten..

Upstairs in the choir loft there was a special room
devoted to the T4 killings, to euthanasia.
It is the room that is the exception
to Niemöller's poem.
Looking at the panels I heard
my grandmother's voice:

Deliveries might contain anything; we read the pamphlet
about the woman whose daughter's
remains were mailed to her. Mandelentzündung, the form letter read,
tonsillitis; our condolences. But she had her tonsils out
at six, the woman wrote back. Two weeks later,
the mailman delivered another brazen container of ashes.

Sarah brought home Rechnungen
from school with questions like How many Einfamilienhäuser
can you build with the money it takes
to run an institution for Gebrechliche?
Plain suited men opened the gates between our hedges,
stepped stones across trimmed lawns.
We burrowed into our houses, traced
infirm lips, pleaded for silence
and at the doorbell willed our eyes
vacant. Nein, nein,
keine hier

Markus,
my grandmother told me once
that they wouldn't let the doctors take Frank. And then she said
But the others
who weren't sick, weren't
our relatives, we didn't
know them—
didn't, I mean, know about them

Lise und Markus: Winter

some word-scrims
eyelet lace more flimsy
open than a chain-link fence
here in a tornado
above unstoppable
the sink and I'm

our long white windows helpless
Markus sparrow
dear wings
birds battering
will they along the mesh
ever come back?

Lise und Markus: Morning

Fourteen minutes on the clock I sobbed Soon the crickets will stop
an hour after dawn till next summer

I prayed don't let him hear me so far back and down
feel me coiled shaking our bed dry creaking
of breath compressed to boiling breath

Don't damn him tightened barren
still asleep

Impossible pressure will evaporate
if he rolls over this is not the time

touch, speak

there are
no answers no words for asking
it would be unfair

to him so possible and warm sleep even breathing no words now

lie next to me awake
be

not here

In den Vereinigten Staaten

Your language is killing me
he says Does verstehen mean anything
other than understand
I say No I don't think so
look away

trying to remember the word
I thought of while reciting
poems to myself in the car
stunned
to be loving the sound of my voice
not mine exactly more
the taste of the clean-scraped words

*nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille sich lautlos auf
only sometimes the curtain of the pupil opens soundlessly*

this Landschaft does not move
all the buildings flat and too young
billboards slow and soggy
where the sun was setting there were
no clouds keine Wolken
billboards sharply black

with brightness behind them
brightness so short then
slipweaving trails in my Lampen
all the parallel wheels

Da ist es There it is und weg
and gone as I followed the dotted lines
slowed to a red light at the end
of the wrong off-ramp driving abwesend
as my mother always feared I would

The rainy black pavement shone green
The word left
a space I could drive through

It was lowercase
so a verb or an adjective
It started with *a*
had to do with the defiant song
sung in former East Germany
Thoughts are free it said
no one can catch them

He said he was learning
my language Sprache sprechen

But we have been in his country for three years
why is he asking about verstehen

What is watered silk
and how do you make it
why are you sitting and drawing
the Knoten I tied in my blue
scarf reine Seide pure silk

My mother painted it
stretched gently in a square wood frame
she scattered streuen rock salt
while the ink was wet
that's what the little star shapes are

Dann geht ein Bild hinein
an image enters

I wish that when you asked me questions
you wanted answers
hörst du you hear

siehst du you see the dotted lines
run everywhere
knots hard to follow

Markus I am afraid of this room
not your deine fault
all the mismatched easels
not yours
which may fall anytime drop
the light unframed canvases
this week with colors
meant to be bright but in fact

muddy schmutzig dancing
The walls in this room
overwhelm me with their length
their blankness
Space is so cheap here
but I know these windows in daylight
vinyl frames you can't open
to get fresh Luft to breathe

screens that turn the world blurred
alltagsgrau gray

geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille
goes through the limbs' taut silence

I am not
I don't know how to tell you this
my language
even if you understand verstehen
you won't

if I say it out loud will that take away
all the me you know

I went back to visit
two weeks ago
got off the plane
searched for the reason
in German Grund Erklärung
for my earliness
Rückenwind I said
but did not trust
my voice or the word
because it translated
so easily from English
If I had remembered tail
means Schwanz
and Rücken back
the shiny airport tiles might not have dropped
from under my feet

What is it
that I want to say to you
and who are you
mein Bruder and not

the lover I wanted
my father all not
the man who stood here
said what you said

if only you were innen here me mit

APPENDIX

“Smoke”

p. 17: “From this cloud, look!” is Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the beginning of Rainer Maria Rilke’s Spanish Trilogy, Part 1: “Aus dieser Wolke, schaue:”

“The Unnamed Civil Servant’s Daughter Addresses Mitya Karamazov”

Epigraph taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Ignat Avsey.

“Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz”

Nach Selbstportraits von Käthe Kollwitz: “After Self-Portraits by Käthe Kollwitz

I. Kartuschchen

Kartuschchen: “Little Cartouche”

II. How to Untake a Lover

Italics in this section are translated from Kollwitz’s diaries.

III. Dreimonatkind

Italics in this section are translated from of Kollwitz’s diaries.

IV. Eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe

eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe: a gift is a task

empört: indignant

Abfluss: gutter

V. Land der Dichter und Denker

Land der Dichter und Denker: country of poets and thinkers

Vaterlandsliebe: lit. “fathercountrylove”

Vater, ich kann das nicht annehmen: Father, I cannot accept that.

Wiederfinden: finding again

Siegesfest: victory celebration

Selige Sehnsucht: holy/blissful longing

VI. Selbstportrait

Selbstportrait: self-portrait

VII. Mutter und Sohn

“Mutter und Sohn,” also known as “Mutter mit totem Sohn,” or “Pietà,” bronze sculpture, 1938/39.

VIII. Ohne Modell

ohne Modell: without a model

The German in this section is taken from the dialogue accompanying a drawing by Heinrich Zille, showing a one-room apartment with a boy at the window and a woman sewing.

Erwin's answer [in broad Berlin dialect]: "Aw, Mom, it smells mighty fine again today of the greasy soot from the crematorium!"

IX. Pietà (Mutter mit totem Sohn)

Mutter mit totem Sohn: mother with dead son

Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden: seed fruits shall not be ground

Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände, / Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende: "Create, the day-work of my hands / High joy that I finish it"

Karfreitag: Good Friday

"Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken": "I saw the world with loving looks"

Malweiber: "painting bitches"

Zeichenschule für Damen: Drawing School for Ladies

XI. Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden

Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden: "seed-fruits shall not be ground"

Kollwitz closed an open letter printed in *Vorwärts* with this quotation from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*).

Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände, / Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende: Goethe,

"Create, the day-work of my hands / High joy that I finish it," from poem

"Hoffnung" ("Hope").

Ich sah die Welt mit liebevollen Blicken: Goethe, "I saw the world with loving looks," from poem *"Zu meinen Handzeichnungen,"* "To My Hand-Drawings."

Rodin: passage referred to is from *Les Cathedrales de France*, in German translation.

"Selbstgespräch mit Franziskus"

Selbstgespräch a conversation with oneself

Liebe geht durch den Magen: Love goes through the stomach.

Flügel der Morgenröte: wings of the dawn (from the title of a song based on Psalm 139)

kraulen: scratch, rub, massage (an animal)

Franz: Franz von Assisi, St. Francis

"Lise und Markus: Home"

Hör doch: Listen

"Der Mond ist Aufgegangen"

der Mond ist aufgegangen: the moon is risen

"Lise: Akt"

Akt: a nude

“Tiergarten 4, Berlin”

Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten: When the Nazis came for the communists

Rechnungen: calculations

Einfamilienhäuser: single-family houses

Gebrechliche: invalids (lit. “frail ones”)

“When the Nazis came for the Communists” is a line from a Martin Niemöller poem, originally given as part of a speech to a church in Frankfurt. The full poem, translated, runs:

“When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.”

“In den Vereinigten Staaten”

in den Vereinigten Staaten: in the United States

Landschaft: landscape